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NOTES
ON
THE PROPOSED ABOLITION
OF
SLAVERY IN VIRGINIA
IN 1785
BY
ALBERT MATTHEWS

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NOTES
ON
THE PROPOSED ABOLITION
OF
SLAVERY IN VIRGINIA.

As some of the extracts I am about to read, though relating chiefly to the proposed abolition of slavery in Virginia in 1785, refer to Washington, it seemed appropriate to present them at this meeting.¹

The followers of John Wesley early became prominent as missionaries in this country, and among the most noted of these were Francis Asbury and Thomas Coke, from whose writings we get interesting glimpses of the anti-slavery agitation. Bishop Asbury, referring to the Conference at Bristol, England, in 1771, said: —

“Before this, I had felt for half a year strong intimations in my mind that I should visit America; . . . At the Conference it was proposed that some preachers should go over to the American continent. I spoke my mind, and made an offer of myself. It was accepted by Mr. Wesley and others, who judged I had a call.”²

At once Asbury made his preparations, sailed the next month, and for thirteen years wandered up and down the American conti-

¹ The meeting of February, 1900.

² Journal of Rev. Francis Asbury, Bishop of the Methodist Episcopal Church, New York, 1852, i. 11.

ment, until, on 14 November, 1784, he records that, to his great joy, he "met those dear men of God, Dr. Coke, and Richard Whatecoat; we were greatly comforted together."¹ On 24 December he rode to Baltimore, where he met a few preachers, and —

"it was agreed to form ourselves into an Episcopal Church, and to have superintendents, elders, and deacons. When the conference was seated, Dr. Coke and myself were unanimously elected to the superintendency of the Church, and my ordination followed, after being previously ordained deacon and elder."²

On 30 April, 1785, while in Virginia, he says that he —

"found the minds of the people greatly agitated with our rules against slavery, and a proposed petition to the general assembly for the emancipation of the blacks. Colonel — and Doctor Coke disputed on the subject, and the Colonel used some threats: next day, brother O'Kelly let fly at them, and they were made angry enough; we, however, came

¹ Asbury, *Journal*, i. 484.

² *Ibid.* i. 486. Asbury was ordained Deacon 25 December, Elder on the twenty-sixth, and Superintendent on the twenty-seventh, each time by Coke. It may be explained that the title of "Superintendent" was at first used, but was soon displaced by that of "Bishop." In the Minutes of the Annual Conferences for 1785, 1786, and 1787, Coke and Asbury were called Superintendents; in 1788, for the first time, the two men appear as Bishops. Yet, as we have seen, the title of Methodist Episcopal Church was adopted at the Baltimore Conference of 1784. Just before leaving England, Coke had been ordained Superintendent by Wesley; but Wesley was utterly opposed to the assumption of the title of Bishop, and thus expressed himself in a letter to Asbury written 20 September, 1788:—

"How can you, how dare you, suffer yourself to be called Bishop? I shudder, I start at the very thought! Men may call *me* a knave or a fool; a rascal, a scoundrel, and I am content: But they shall never, by my consent, call me *Bishop*! For my sake, for God's sake, for Christ's sake, put a full end to this!" (H. Moore's *Life of the Rev. John Wesley*, ii. 340.)

In regard to the assumption by the American Methodists of the titles of Episcopal and Bishop, and the heated controversies thereby engendered, the reader is referred to the Minutes of the Annual Conferences of the Methodist Episcopal Church, New York, 1840, i. 21, 22; Minutes of Several Conversations between The Rev. Thomas Coke, LL.D., The Rev. Francis Asbury and Others, *etc.*, 1785, p. 3; J. Whitehead's *Life of the Rev. John Wesley*, ii. 416, 417; H. Moore's *Life of the Rev. John Wesley*, ii. 327-340; L. Tyerman's *Life and Times of the Rev. John Wesley*, New York, 1872, iii. 435-449.

off with whole bones, and our business in conference was finished in peace.”¹

On 22 May, he continues, “we rode to Alexandria, to meet Dr. Coke,” and on 26 May “we waited on GENERAL WASHINGTON, who received us very politely, and gave us his opinion against slavery.”² Later, but while still in Virginia, he relates, under date of 15 November, that —

“our conversation turned upon slavery; the difficulties attending emancipation, and the resentment some of the members of the Virginia legislature expressed against those who favoured a general abolition.”³

These remarks by Asbury form a fitting introduction to the extracts I have now to offer, — those, namely, taken from a book which appears to be little known.⁴ It is entitled *Extracts of the Journals of the Rev. Dr. Coke's Five Visits to America*,⁵ and was published at London in 1793. The author, Thomas Coke, born in Wales in 1747, a graduate of Jesus College, Oxford, in 1776 came under the influence of John Wesley,⁶ and in 1784 was urged by

¹ Asbury, *Journal*, i. 495.

² *Ibid.* i. 496.

³ *Ibid.* i. 502.

⁴ Neither our associate Mr. W. C. Ford, who found the title in a catalogue (but attributed to Dr. Cook) and called my attention to it, nor our associate Mr. L. Swift had ever seen the book.

⁵ Copies will be found in the Boston Public Library and in the Harvard College Library. The latter has also a copy of *Extracts of the Journals of the Rev. Dr. Coke's Three Visits to America*, London, 1790. It is dedicated to John Wesley, and in the preface Dr. Coke says that —

“the very favourable reception my little Journals have met with, demonstrated by the rapid sale of the former editions, induces me to publish the whole of them collectively; and to add thereto an extract of the Journal of my first visit to America, which was never printed before.” (p. v.)

After the death of Dr. Coke, which took place in 1814, there was published at Dublin, in 1816, *Extracts of the Journals of the late Rev. Thomas Coke, LL.D.*; comprising several Visits to North-America and the West-Indies; his Tour through a Part of Ireland, and his nearly finished Voyage to Bombay in the East-Indies: To which is prefixed A Life of the Doctor. A copy of this book is in the Boston Public Library.

⁶ Under date of 13 August, 1776, Wesley wrote: —

“I preached at Taunton, and afterwards . . . went to Kingston. Here I found a clergyman, Dr. Coke, late a gentleman commoner of Jesus College, Oxford, who came twenty miles on purpose to meet me. I had much conversation with him; and a union then began, which, I trust, shall never end.” (L. Tyerman's *Life and Times of the Rev. John Wesley*, iii. 214.)

Wesley to go to the United States. Coke left England in September, 1784, and reached New York the third of November. At once proceeding south, he made extensive tours in that section of the country; he ordained Asbury, as we have already seen; and on the fifth of April, 1785, he "dared for the first time to bear a public testimony against slavery," and did "not find that more than one was offended."¹ This calm was of short duration, for on the tenth of April he says:—

"I had now for the first time a very little persecution. The testimony I bore in this place against slave-holding, provoked many of the unawakened to retire out of the barn [in which he was preaching], and to combine together to flog me (so they expressed it) as soon as I came out. A high-headed Lady also went out, and told the rioters (as I was afterwards informed) that she would give fifty pounds, if they would give that little Doctor one hundred lashes. When I came out, they surrounded me, but had only power to talk."²

Luckily his host, at whose house Coke and his fellow-preachers were obliged, on account of numbers, "to lie three in a bed," was a justice of the peace, and the rage of the multitude was restrained; though on the following day he narrowly escaped severe treatment, for—

"Here a mob came to meet me with staves and clubs. Their plan, I believe, was to fall upon me as soon as I touched on the subject of slavery. I knew nothing of it till I had done preaching; but not seeing it my duty to touch on the subject here, their scheme was defeated, and they suffered me to pass through them without molestation."³

Undeterred by these rebuffs, he attended a quarterly meeting in Mecklenburg County, Virginia, 24 and 25 April, and says:—

¹ Extracts, *etc.*, 1793, p. 33.

² *Ibid.* p. 35. The expression "high-headed," the meaning of which is perhaps not obvious at a glance, is explained by the following extract:—

"Q. 18. Should we insist on the Rules concerning Dress? A. By all means. This is no Time to give any Encouragement to Superfluity of Apparel. Therefore give no Tickets . . . to any that wear High-Heads, enormous Bonnets, Ruffles or Rings." (Minutes of Several Conversations, *etc.*, 1785, pp. 9, 10.)

The noun "high-head" was not uncommon at that period, but Coke's adjective "high-headed" is unrecorded in the Oxford Dictionary.

³ Extracts, *etc.*, 1793, pp. 35, 36.

"Here I bore a public testimony against Slavery, and have found out a method of delivering it without much offence, or at least without causing a tumult: and that is, by first addressing the Negroes in a very pathetic manner on the Duty of Servants to Masters; and then the Whites will receive quietly what I have to say to them."¹

The opposition to slavery was not started by Coke, for action against it had been taken in the Conferences for 1780 and 1783;² but the stringent rules drawn up in 1784 were very likely due to Coke's influence. These rules are as follows:—

"Q. 42. What Methods can we take to extirpate Slavery?

"A. We are deeply conscious of the Impropriety of making new Terms of Communion for a religious Society already established, excepting on the most pressing Occasion: and such we esteem the Practice of holding our Fellow-Creatures in Slavery. We view it as contrary to the Golden Law of God on which hang all the Law and the Prophets, and the unalienable Rights of Mankind, as well as every Principle of the Revolution, to hold in the deepest Debasement, in a more abject Slavery than is perhaps to be found in any Part of the World except America, so many Souls that are all capable of the Image of God.

"We therefore think it our most bounden Duty, to take immediately some effectual Method to extirpate this Abomination from among us; And for that Purpose we add the following to the Rules of our Society: viz.

"1. Every Member of our Society who has Slaves in his Possession, shall within twelve Months after Notice given to him by the Assistant (which Notice the Assistants are required immediately and without any Delay to give in their respective Circuits) legally execute and record an Instrument, whereby he emancipates and sets free every Slave in his Possession who is between the Ages of Forty and Forty-five immediately, or at the farthest when they arrive at the Age of Forty-five:

"And every Slave who is between the Ages of Twenty-five and Forty immediately, or at farthest at the Expiration of five Years from the Date of the said Instrument:

"And every Slave who is between the Ages of Twenty and Twenty-five immediately, or at farthest when they arrive at the Age of Thirty:

"And every Slave under the Age of Twenty, as soon as they arrive at the Age of Twenty-five at farthest.

"And every Infant born in Slavery after the above-mentioned Rules are complied with, immediately on its Birth.

¹ Extracts, *etc.*, 1793, p. 37.

² See Minutes of the Annual Conferences, i. 12, 18, 20, 21, 24.

"2. Every Assistant shall keep a Journal, in which he shall regularly minute down the Names and Ages of all the Slaves belonging to all the Masters in his respective Circuit, and also the Date of every Instrument executed and recorded for the Manumission of the Slaves, with the Name of the Court, Book and Folio, in which the said Instruments respectively shall have been recorded: Which Journal shall be handed down in each Circuit to the succeeding Assistants.

"3. In Consideration that these Rules form a new Term of Communion, every Person concerned, who will not comply with them, shall have Liberty quietly to withdraw himself from our Society within the twelve Months succeeding the Notice given as aforesaid: Otherwise the Assistant shall exclude him in the Society.

"4. No person so *voluntarily withdrawn*, or so *excluded*, shall ever partake of the Supper of the Lord with the Methodists, till he complies with the above-Requisitions.

"No Person holding Slaves shall, in future, be admitted into Society or to the Lord's Supper, till he previously complies with these Rules concerning Slavery.

"N. B. These Rules are to affect the Members of our Society no farther than as they are consistent with the Laws of the States in which they reside.

"And respecting our Brethren in *Virginia* that are concerned, and after due Consideration of their peculiar Circumstances, we allow them *two Years* from the Notice given, to consider the Expedience of Compliance or Non-Compliance with these Rules.

"Q. 43. What shall be done with those who buy or sell Slaves, or give them away ?

"A. They are immediately to be expelled: unless they buy them on purpose to free them."¹

In the first week in May, Coke records that —

"A great many principal friends met us here to insist on a Repeal of the Slave-Rules; but when they found that we had thoughts of withdrawing ourselves entirely from the Circuit on account of the violent spirit of some leading men, they drew in their horns, and sent us a very humble letter, intreating that Preachers might be appointed for their Circuit. . . . After mature consideration we formed a petition, a copy of

¹ Minutes of Several Conversations between The Rev. Thomas Coke, LL.D., The Rev. Francis Asbury and Others, at a Conference, begun in Baltimore, in the State of Maryland, on Monday, the 27th. of December, in the Year 1784. Composing a Form of Discipline for the Ministers, Preachers and other Members of the Methodist Episcopal Church in America. Philadelphia, . . . M, DCC, LXXXV. Pp. 15-17. A copy of this little book will be found in the Boston Athenæum.

which was given to every Preacher, intreating the General Assembly of *Virginia*, to pass a Law for the immediate or gradual emancipation of all the Slaves. It is to be signed by all the Freeholders we can procure, and those I believe will not be few. There have been many debates already on the subject in the Assembly.”¹

Nor was slavery his only cause for annoyance. On the fifteenth of May he preached to a large congregation, and says: —

“During the sermon, after I had spoken very pointedly concerning the impropriety of going in and out during divine service, two dressy girls walked out with such an impudent air, that I rebuked them keenly. After the public service, whilst I was administering the sacrament, baptizing, and meeting the Society, their father who is a Colonel, raged at the outside of the Church, declaring that as soon as I came out, he would horse-whip me for the indignity shewn to his family. But his two brothers (all unawakened) took my part, and insisted that I had done my duty, and the young ladies deserved it. However, finding that our preaching in that Church, which we do regularly, chiefly depends upon him, I wrote a letter of apology to him as far as the truth would permit, when I came to my lodging. We had a good time during the sermon and the Sacrament. But when I enlarged to the Society on *Negro-Slavery*, the principal leader raged like a lion, and desired to withdraw from the Society. I took him at his word, and appointed that excellent man (Brother *Skelton*) Leader in his stead. When the Society came out of the Church, they surrounded Brother *Skelton*, ‘And will *you*,’ said they, ‘Set your Slaves at liberty?’ (He has many Slaves) ‘Yes,’ says he, ‘I believe I shall.’”²

On the twenty-fifth of May he met at Alexandria “that dear, valuable man, Mr. Asbury;” and on the twenty-sixth their visit to Mount Vernon took place. He writes: —

“Mr. *Asbury* and I set off for General *Washington’s*. We were engaged to dine there the day before. The General’s Seat is very elegant, built upon the great river *Potomawk*; for the improvement of the navigation of which, he is carrying on jointly with the State some amazing Plans. He received us very politely, and was very open to access. He is quite the plain, Country-Gentleman. After dinner we desired a private interview, and opened to him the grand business on

¹ Extracts, etc., 1793, p. 39.

² *Ibid.* pp. 40, 41.

which we came, presenting to him our petition for the emancipation of the Negroes, and intreating his signature, if the eminence of his station did not deem it inexpedient for him to sign any petition. He informed us that he was of our sentiments, and had signified his thoughts on the subject to most of the great men of the State: that he did not see it proper to sign the petition, but if the Assembly took it into consideration, would signify his sentiments to the Assembly by a letter. He asked us to spend the evening and lodge at his house, but our engagements at *Annapolis* the following day would not admit of it. We returned that evening to *Alexandria*.”¹

His experience had taught him caution, and at a conference held 1 June at Baltimore, —

“We thought it prudent to suspend the minute concerning Slavery, on account of the great opposition that had been given it, our work being in too infantile a state to push things to extremity.”²

Coke returned to England the same month, and though later he made frequent visits to this country and to the West Indies, he does not seem again to have visited Mount Vernon.³

In connection with Dr. Coke’s characterization of Washington as “quite the plain, Country-Gentleman,” it is pertinent to quote an extract from a letter which our associate Mr. Ford has just

¹ Extracts, *etc.*, 1793, p. 45.

² *Ibid.* p. 46. The official record is as follows: —

“It is recommended to all our brethren to suspend the execution of the minute on slavery till the deliberations of a future Conference; that an equal space of time be allowed all our members for consideration, when the minute shall be put in force. *N. B.* We do hold in the deepest abhorrence the practice of slavery; and shall not cease to seek its destruction by all wise and prudent means.” (Minutes of the Annual Conferences, i. 24.)

In 1795 it was recommended that a general fast be held for the purpose, among other things, of lamenting “the deep-rooted vassalage that still reigneth in many parts of these free, independent United States;” while in a recommendation for a general thanksgiving, it was remarked that “for African liberty, we feel gratitude that many thousands of these poor people are free and pious.” (Minutes, *etc.*, i. 64.) Thereafter all references to slavery apparently disappear from the Minutes.

³ In 1789 a congratulatory address was sent to Washington by the Methodists at their Conference, much to the disturbance of the English Wesleyans. Washington’s reply to this address will be found in Sparks’s edition of his Writings, xii. 153, 154.

placed in my hands. It is dated Philadelphia, 25 December, 1783, shortly after Washington had taken his departure, and is interesting as having been written to Elias Boudinot by that arch-enemy of Washington, Dr. Benjamin Rush. It is as follows : —

“ Our beloved Gen Washington left us a few days ago after receiving a thousand marks of respect & affection from all classes of people. In his way to Baltimore he was caught in a shower of rain, & sought a shelter from it in the common stage waggon. When the waggon came to a tavern, the tavern keeper, who knew him, received him with the greatest respect, & offered to prepare a dinner for him & his aids in a separate room. ‘No — no,’ said the General, ‘It is customary for travellers in this waggon to dine together. — I will dine nowhere but in this common room with these my fellow passengers,’ & accordingly sat down & ate his dinner like any other Virginia planter with them. This act throws a greater lustre over his character than all his victories. It shows him to be a man — a citizen — & a philosopher. His victories can only denominate him a General.”¹

Allusions to this early attempt to abolish slavery in Virginia appear to be rare, but we can trace out the result from other sources of information. On Tuesday, 8 November, 1785, there was presented and read, in the Virginia House of Deputies, —

“ Also, a petition of sundry persons, whose names are thereunto subscribed ; setting forth, that they are firmly persuaded, that it is contrary to the fundamental principles of the christian religion, to keep so considerable a number of our fellow creatures, the negroes in this State, in slavery ; that it is also an express violation of the principles upon which our government is founded ; and that a general emancipation of them, under certain restrictions, would greatly contribute to strengthen it, by attaching them by the ties of interest and gratitude, to its support ; and praying that an act may pass to that effect.

“ Also, a petition of sundry inhabitants of the county of Mecklenburg, whose names are thereunto subscribed, in opposition thereto ; and praying that the act, ‘empowering the owners of slaves to emancipate them ;’ may be repealed.

“ *Ordered*, That the said petitions do severally lie on the table.”²

¹ The extract occurs in a letter written 23 November, 1854, by J. W. Wallace to Dr. Griswold, from an original in the possession of Wallace.

² Journal of the House of Delegates of the Commonwealth of Virginia, etc., Richmond, 1828, p. 27. The reference is to “ An act to authorize the manu-

On Thursday, the tenth of November, —

“On a motion made, The House proceeded to consider the petition of sundry persons presented on Tuesday last, which lay on the table, praying for a general emancipation of slaves, and the same being read :

“A motion was made, and the question being put, to reject the said petition,

“It passed in the affirmative, *nemine contra dicente*.

“*Resolved*, That the said petition be rejected.”¹

These entries show the fate of the petition. From Madison we get something more than the bare details. Writing to Washington 11 November, 1785, he says : —

“The pulse of the House of Delegates was felt on Thursday with regard to a general manumission, by a petition presented on that subject. It was rejected without dissent, but not without an avowed patronage of its principles by sundry respectable members. A motion was made to throw it under the table, which was treated with as much indignation on one side as the petition itself was on the other. There are several petitions before the House against any step towards freeing the Slaves, and even praying for a repeal of the law which licenses particular manumissions.”²

Again, writing 22 January, 1786, to Jefferson, then in France, Madison says : —

“Several petitions (from Methodists chiefly) appeared in favor of a gradual abolition of slavery, and several from another quarter for a repeal of the law which licenses private manumissions. The former was not thrown under the table, but was treated with all the indignity short of it. A proposition for bringing in a bill conformably to the latter was decided in the affirmative by the casting vote of the Speaker ; but the bill was thrown out on the first reading by a considerable majority.”³

Finally, from Jefferson himself we get light as to the cause of the failure of the petition. Under date of 22 June, 1786, he says : —

“Of the two commissioners who had concerted the amendatory clause for the gradual emancipation of slaves Mr. Wythe could not be present

mission of slaves,” passed in May, 1782, by which, under certain conditions, manumission was permitted. (See the Virginia Statutes at Large, xi. 39.)

¹ Journal of the House of Delegates, etc., p. 31.

² Madison's Letters and Other Writings, i. 199, 200.

³ *Ibid.* i. 217, 218.

as being a member of the judiciary department, and Mr. Jefferson was absent on the legation to France. But there wanted not in that assembly men of virtue enough to propose, & talents to vindicate this clause. But they saw that the moment of doing it with success was not yet arrived, and that an unsuccessful effort, as too often happens, would only rivet still closer the chains of bondage, and retard the moment of delivery to this oppressed description of men.”¹

Jefferson concludes with one of those vigorous denunciations of slavery to which he so often gave vent.

¹ Jefferson's Writings, edited by P. L. Ford, iv. 184, 185.

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